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**DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE**

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Elements of Non-Communist Politics in Laos

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No 675

**31 December 1970
No. 0403/70A**

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ELEMENTS OF NON-COMMUNIST POLITICS IN LAOS

Among the consequences of the war in Laos has been an understandable disinclination on the part of Western observers—and Lao leaders—to devote much time to comprehending or seeking to influence the course of Lao politics. It has been in part a matter of priorities. The endless military crises over the past seven or eight years have left little time, energy, or resources for other pursuits. But there is also an element of diffidence. Who, even among the Lao, is so arrogant as to think that he is so thoroughly familiar with the arcane arts of Lao politics, that peculiar play of personality, custom, and greed, or is so ambitious as to attempt to alter fundamentally the way Laos is governed? Nobody, except perhaps the Communists. Even Souvanna Phouma, who has been prime minister for eight years and who has recognized the need for organizing and unifying at least the non-Communist factions, has made little or no progress in changing the regional and familial basis of Lao politics. The sad fact is that the time won by the last eight years of warfare has not been well spent, and that Laos is not much more of a nation state today than it was when the unholy coalition government was formed in 1962.

The war has of course been the main culprit. Not only has it placed a great strain on the physical energies and resources of the Lao, but it has also tended to distort the perception of political realities in Laos. The war has been raging so long and its end seems so distant that it has become difficult for all but the most perceptive Lao to keep a firm fix on what the fighting is all about and what the problems and potentialities will be if peace actually comes to the country. The problems associated with the war have been so dominant that politics among the Lao has been considered something of a mischievous game played by unreconstructed politicians: as long as it does not interfere with the more important pursuits—that is, as long as the game does not threaten to upset the status quo—it is suffered with forbearance.

But insofar as Laos is important, so too are the fundamentals of Lao politics. Not only do they directly and sometimes importantly affect the conduct of the war against the Communists, but these politics persistently threaten—as the recent coup plotting testifies—the country's fragile political stability. Even more important is the fact that unless there is a military solution in Laos, unless the Communists by force of arms overthrow the Souvanna government and its rightists and neutralist supporters, or unless the Lao Communists are either militarily defeated or are effectively bottled up in the mountainous areas of eastern Laos, then at some time in the future the contest for Laos will be fought in the political as well as in the military arena. The significance of the recent talks between the government and the Communists is that both sides still seem to recognize that the political dimension of the struggle may once again become important. It is impossible to say when that may happen—in large part because the fate of Laos depends so heavily on developments elsewhere in Indochina—but if it does, the personalities and factors at work on the non-Communist side will once again become of paramount importance in determining the direction of Laos.

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The Political Setting

Laos remains today the weakest and least developed of the four Indochinese states that emerged from World War II. It is ethnically and linguistically one of the most complex areas in Asia, and its population is largely illiterate. These factors, compounded by the rough terrain of the country's valleys and high mountains, have made difficult the growth of any real sense of national identity.

Although Laos has many of the trappings of a modern state, in reality the Provisional Government of National Unity masks a semifeastal society in which political life revolves around family and regional interests. The traditional forces of Lao politics are changing only slowly under the pressures of foreign assistance, 25 years of internal war, and exposure to the modern world.

The current leadership is drawn from a narrowly based elite, the "great families" of Laos, which, though closely related, are neither united nor national. They are divided on regional and ethnic lines. Within these major groupings there are splits between the military and the civil service.

Shifting and unstable coalitions of individuals from these groups have banded together on occasions to form political parties. If the non-Communist elements in Laos are to have any success in political competition with the Communist-dominated Lao Patriotic Front in the future, they must necessarily close ranks again.

For much of its history Laos had been an amorphous grouping of separate, dynastic states that, in addition to fighting each other, were threatened and often subjugated by their more powerful neighbors in Thailand and Vietnam. French colonial intervention in the 19th century stopped the absorption of these kingdoms into Thailand and Vietnam, added a veneer of French culture for a small handful of the Lao leaders, but did little to unify the country. It was only in

1946 that the various parts of French-controlled Laos were brought under a centralized administration. The country has lacked the ethnic and cultural homogeneity that has helped hold together the peoples of Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Out of this has come contemporary Laos, and the present Lao Kingdom, which adopted its current constitutional form in 1947 and gained full independence only in 1953.

Regional identity, on the other hand, is fixed, and local loyalties to traditional leaders are well established. In national elections where choices have been offered, local people have voted, almost without question, for the men and names they know—the local members of the "great families" of Laos. Similarly, it has been the practice to appoint representatives of the local families to leading positions in the government services. This practice simply recognizes and accepts the realities of political power.

The influence and control of regional leaders comes, as in all traditional societies, from their social status in the community. This status, which is difficult to attain, depends most heavily on inherited family standing, supplemented by education, administrative or manipulative skills, and wealth. Although wealth as such is not the most important measure of status in Lao society, almost all great families are engaged, directly or indirectly, in commerce.

The military leadership, which has emerged as a new element in Lao politics, is still tied to the traditional sources of power. Its loyalties, although often more national than those of some civilian leaders, are still largely regional and ethnic, and senior officers are largely drawn from the great families of Laos.

Another challenge to the present leadership of Laos is again coming from within the elite itself. This is evident in the discontent of the middle-level civil and military officers, who view themselves as better trained and more competent than their seniors, and also from the younger

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men, fresh from overseas educational experiences. These men are frequently impatient and scornful of the competence of their immediate seniors. The maneuvering of these elite elements has already brought about some changes in leadership, particularly in the National Assembly and junior Cabinet offices, but none in the basic orientation of Lao politics.

The Great Families of Laos and their Bases of Operations

For Lao national unity, the two most important groupings within the politically conscious elite are closely related and regionally based in the northern areas of Luang Prabang. The first is that of the King, Savang Vatthana, and the immediate royal family. The second is that of the cadet, or junior, branch of the royal family, which is outside the direct line of descent. The latter is currently headed by Prince Souvanna Phouma, who is prime minister of Laos. Although national in their activities and viewpoint, both these men are representative of regional interests, and would have little or no power without the base.

The Royal Family

The royal family of Luang Prabang is not wealthy, but exercises influence almost entirely on the basis of tradition and prestige.

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It is, however, by agreement among the other great families of the country, the only royal family of Laos. Thus far all political elements in Laos, including the Communist-dominated Lao Patriotic Front, have accepted the monarchy as necessary to Laotian continuity.

The King plays his ceremonial role with some skill. Although well informed on domestic and foreign affairs, he has shown some reluctance to be drawn into the day-to-day problems of national administration. This detachment is



King Savang Vatthana and Queen Khamphoui...they reign but do not rule.

traditional with a Lao king, and is undoubtedly the wisest course because, in competition with other political forces in the country, the King has limited capital and few means of replenishing it.

The present King is not entirely passive, however. He has weighed in on military matters, particularly those relating to the security of his home area in north Laos, and when it has appeared that his influence was essential to national stability. For example, when Kong Le seized Vientiane in 1960 and attempted to install Souvanna as prime minister, the King withheld his approval. He did the same thing in 1964 when General Kouprasith attempted a coup—this time to sustain Souvanna Phouma's government. Again in 1966 when the National Assembly passed a "no confidence" resolution against the government of National Unity, the King stood firm against most of the great families of central and south Laos—but with the ambassadors of the great powers—to prorogue the assembly and sustain the prime minister.

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The royal family's limited wealth is drawn primarily from an annual grant in the national budget. It is supplemented, however, by income from real estate, two large farms, and a royal teak forest. It may also benefit from the illegal arms and opium smuggling of the Lao commander in chief, General Ouan Rathikoun, with whom the King maintains close personal ties.

The royal family's influence is quite naturally felt in the major decisions of government inasmuch as changes cannot be made legally, without royal approval. This has meant, among other things, the generous placement of the King's close relatives in positions of importance in the national service. These include the commander of Military Region I (Luang Prabang), Brigadier General Tiao (Prince) Sayavong, the King's half-brother, and his deputy, Brigadier General Tiao Vannaseng Sayasane, a member of the royal family who is married to the King's cousin. In addition, Tiao Khammao, half-brother of the King, serves as ambassador to Great Britain.

Important though these and other posts held by the royal family may be, it is probably more significant that the King has been able to develop close relations with his major military commanders. First, he is naturally identified with his commander in chief, General Ouan, who is from Luang Prabang, and with his own half-brother, General Sayavong, the military commander of Military Region I. In addition, he appears to have sought out commanders who have held the confidence of US officials, and has developed ties with General Vang Pao, the Meo military commander of Military Region II and with General Phasouk Somly, the commanding general of Military Region IV. These personal associations could prove useful in confrontations between the royal family and the powerful families of Vientiane and of the south.

The Cadet Branch of the Royal Family

The cadet or junior branch of the royal family looms large on the Lao political scene

primarily on the basis of the political skill and administrative competence of its leading members. Although its members are rich and well educated, it does not compare in wealth with the great families of Vientiane and of south Laos. Its prestige is subordinated in the north to the King's immediate family, and its members are no longer in line for succession to the Lao throne. It has, nonetheless, provided five of the nine prime ministers who have served Laos since 1946 and three of the country's most highly regarded postwar leaders—the deceased Prince Petsarath, founder of the Lao Issara movement; Prince Souvanna Phouma, the recurrent and present prime minister; and Prince Souphanouvong, the titular head of the Lao Patriotic Front.

For more than a century and a half, until the 1940s, the senior member of this branch of the royal family served as the "second King," or viceroy of Luang Prabang—and in this position carried on the actual government of the country.



The prime minister, Prince Souvanna Phouma...the indispensable man, at least in the eyes of the great powers.

The King, as the spiritual leader of the realm, reigned but did not rule. Although this post has not been filled since Petsarath's death, its duties have devolved upon the prime minister's office, and it has been quite fitting that for the most part it should be a cadet leader who performs that function.

Souvanna himself is responsible in considerable measure for the present influence of the family. Ever since his return from his engineering education in France in 1931 he has devoted himself to a career as an engineer and as a nationalist and government leader. He has emerged as a man of dedication and integrity. In a country where venality is common, he is

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considered honest. He is frequently disliked for his personality and his policies—especially, perhaps, his continued efforts at reconciliation with the Lao Patriotic Front and his advocacy of Lao neutrality—but he is trusted. Often at odds with the King in Luang Prabang, the na Champassaks in the south, and the Sananikones in Vientiane, he is nonetheless the one man on whom the competing factions in the kingdom can agree to represent them as prime minister.

Perhaps the overwhelming factor that gives Souvanna power in Laos has been his foreign support. Traditionally, Lao leaders have risen and fallen on the basis of their foreign backing, usually by the Thai and Vietnamese, but currently Souvanna appears uniquely essential in the eyes of all major foreign powers concerned with Laos. So long as this remains true, the relative weakness of his branch of the royal family in its competition with the other power centers is not as significant as it might otherwise be.

The future influence of the cadet branch is clouded. In a changed political atmosphere—if the Communists were to gain the upper hand—Prince Souphanouvong, as leader of the Lao Patriotic Front, might succeed his half-brother to the prime ministership. He holds the title of Deputy Prime Minister at this time, though he no longer uses it. It is difficult to imagine that conservative elements of the Lao society would accept him under any circumstances, but there apparently is no other member of the cadet branch with enough stature to succeed Souvanna. Souvanna's own children, although they have been playing a part in Lao politics and in the military, hold dual citizenship and appear to be more at home in France than in Laos.

The na Champassak Family of South Laos

First among the regional powers of Laos—and third in protocol rank behind the Crown Prince—stands Prince Boun Oum na Champassak. Although his national prestige is less than that of either of his cousins, the King and the prime minis-

ter, his wealth and regional power clearly surpasses both, and no national decision can be effectuated in south Laos without his approval.

An important part of the na Champassak prominence is based on tradition. Like the royal



THE THREE PRINCES.

Prince Boun Oum na Champassak (left), major leader of south Laos and the political right, together with Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma (center) and Prince Souphanouvong (right), leader of the Lao Patriotic Front.

family and its junior branch, the na Champassaks are descended from the last great king of Laos, who reigned in the 17th century. Prince Boun Oum, patriarch of the family at 58, is the grandson of the last king of Champassak who reigned before the French arrived. Boun Oum gave up his claim to that throne only in 1946, at the behest of the French, in return for the post of Inspector General and, it is reported, a large personal subsidy.

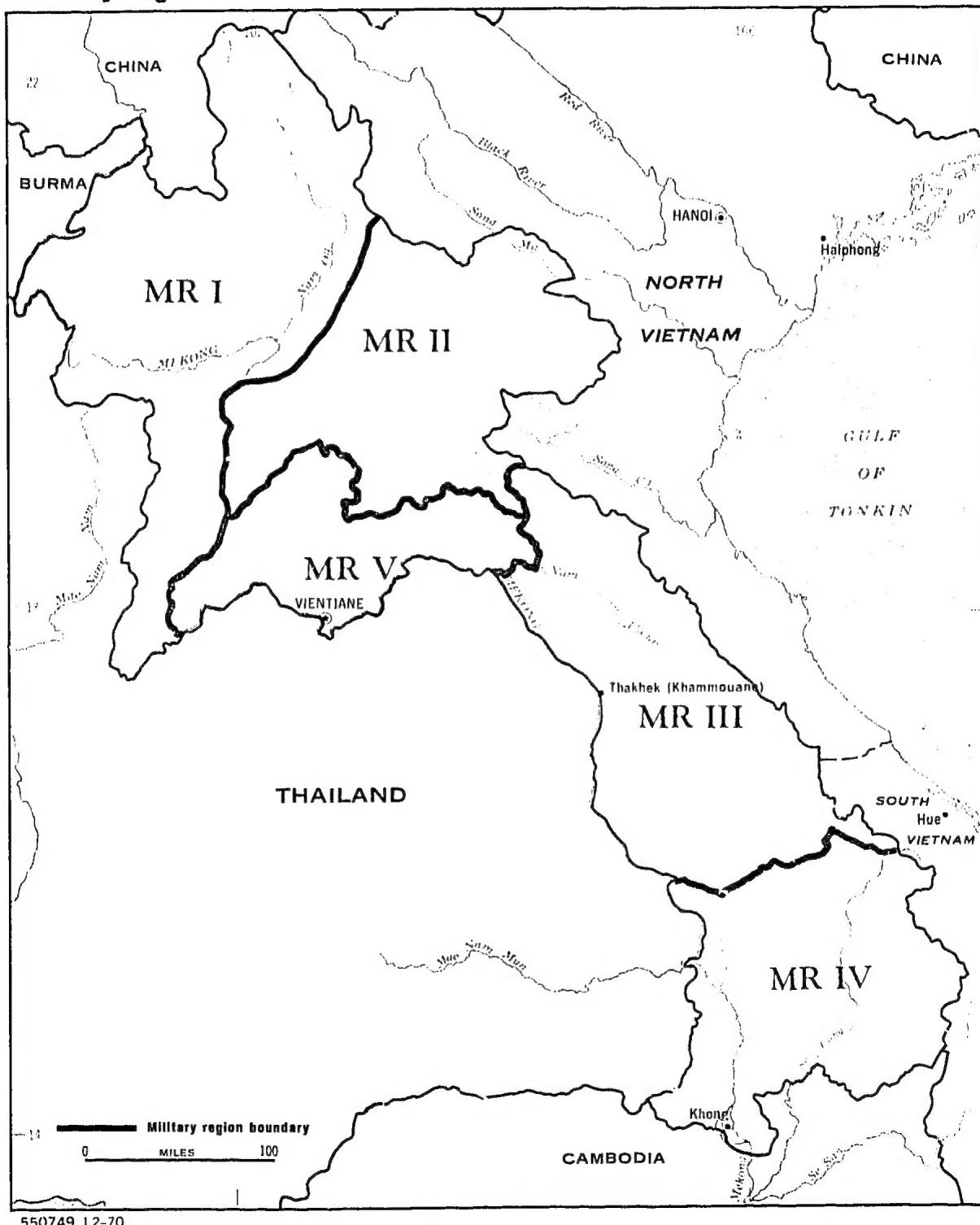
Another important basis for the current na Champassak power is money. As a family, operating in close association with the Chinese business community, the na Champassaks are identified with virtually every important economic activity of the south, from trucking to smuggling and gambling. Their activities in these areas are beyond the control of the central government in Vientiane or, for that matter, of its nominal representatives in the region, the military commander of Military Region IV, or of the provincial governors.

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Military Regions in Laos



Special Report

- 6 -

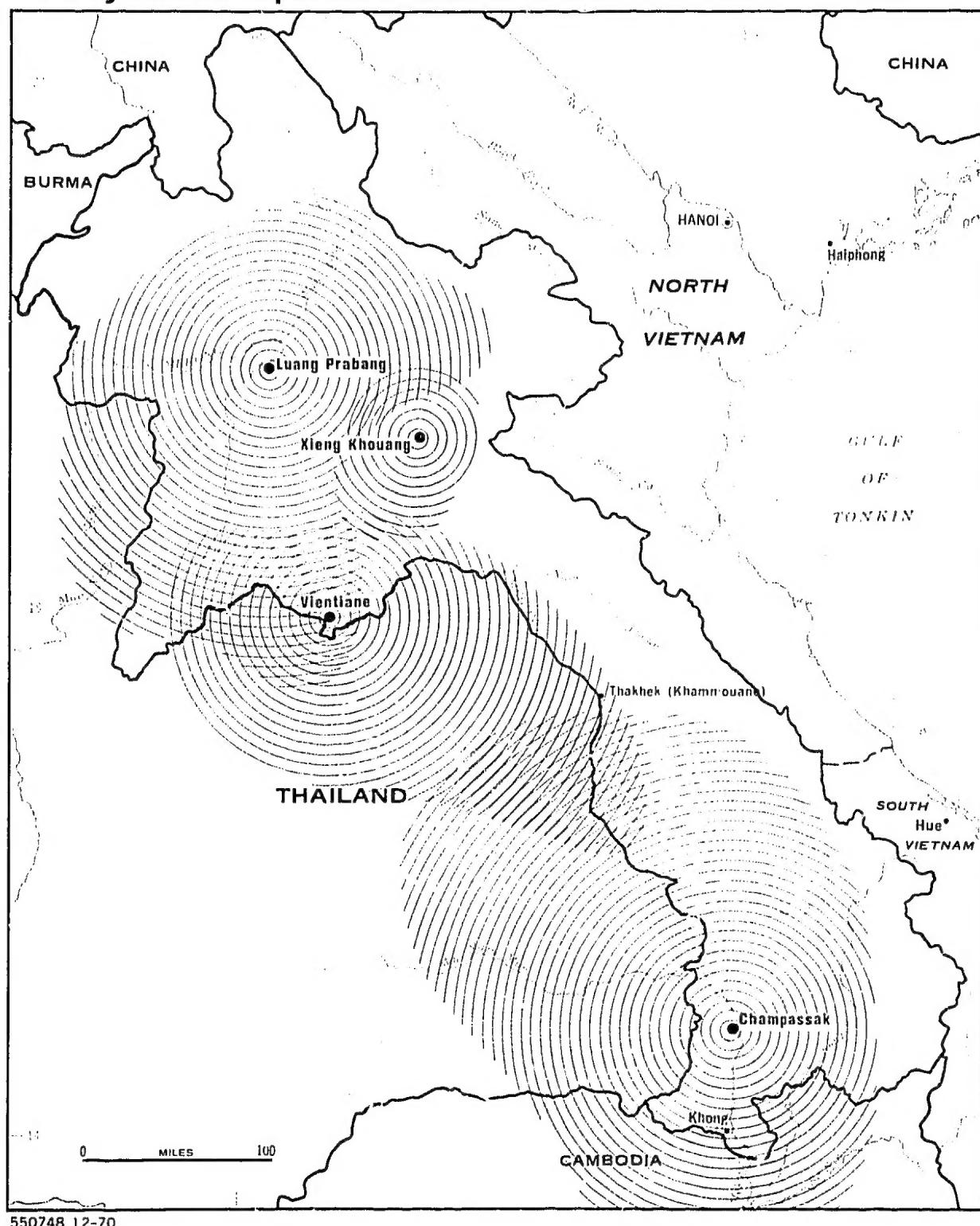
31 December 1970

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The Dynastic Principalities of Traditional Laos



Special Report

- 7 -

31 December 1970

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On the basis of their inherited prestige and contemporary wealth, the na Champassaks hold positions in the cabinet and the civil service. The most prominent family members are Boun Oum's younger brother Boun Om and a nephew Sisouk na Champassak.

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[redacted] Boun Om serves, with little distinction, as minister of religion.

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Sisouk, on the other hand, is one of the most important, influential, and able members of the cabinet. As minister of finance, acting minister for national economy and, most importantly, as de facto minister of defense, Sisouk has been mentioned as a potential prime minister. He has gained these positions on the basis of competence.

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[redacted] The target of frequent criticism in the National Assembly, he has been singled out by powerful northern families from Luang Prabang and Vientiane as their chief southern enemy. On top of all this, he gets along poorly with his relatives in the south.

It is small wonder, then, that the spokesman in Vientiane for the na Champassaks is neither Boun Om nor Sisouk, but Deputy Prime Minister Leuam Irsisiengmay. And this illustrates the technique by which the na Champassaks have increased their influence. They have formed effective working alliances with the other great, though not princely, families of the south. Their chief allies have been the Irsisiengmays and the Nosavans, who dominate the commerce of Savannakhet city and province and are, as a result, wealthy and powerful.

The same pattern of cooperation and personal alliances has strengthened the na Champassak position in the military where, thus far, there are no na Champassaks in senior positions. For a time General Phoumi Nosavan was the military leader for the na Champassak interests. It was Phoumi's military action that brought Boun Oum to the prime ministership in 1960 and made

him one of the "three princes" signing the accords that set up the current Government of National Unity.

With Phoumi now in exile, Boun Oum's major military associates are Generals Phasouk Somly and Bouinpone Makthepharak, commanders respectively of Military Regions IV and III. Both are related by blood and marriage to the na Champassak family, as are a number of younger, less prominent members of the officer corps in the south. Bouinpone [redacted]

[redacted] is suspected of engaging in commerce with the Lao Patriotic Front. Phasouk, on the other hand, has had the reputation of being one of the more honest and public-spirited generals in Laos. His probity has been tarnished by the involvement of his brothers in trade with the Communists, however, and his military reputation has been severely undermined by the losses of Saravane and Attapeu to the Communists. As a result, his over-all influence may have been sharply reduced.

Prince Boun Oum's southern base of support is personal and therefore fragile. Since his first term as prime minister, from 1949 to 1950, Boun Oum has not concerned himself particularly with activities in the north, so long as they did not affect his family interests in the south. Thus, he has exercised less influence nationally than he might have. Also, he has not been able to find a satisfactory heir to run clan activities. Aside from Sisouk, who appears uninterested in the post, the most likely candidate is Tiao Sith na Champassak, Boun Oum's 36-year-old half-brother, who is currently a major on General Phasouk's staff. Popular and promising though he is, his succession has not yet been assured. Thus it is quite possible that when Boun Oum leaves the scene—his health has been bad for years—the na Champassaks may break up into family factions feuding over their commercial interests. If this should occur, the na Champassaks, though wealthy, may decline in influence and play a less prominent role in Lao national politics than they do now.

Special Report

- 8 -

31 December 1970

SECRET

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Whatever the limits on na Champassak influence at the national level, the power of the family at the regional level is very substantial. General Phoumi's coup effort of 1965 was staged as a southern attempt to regain influence in Vientiane. Although this try failed, it emphasized the na Champassak willingness to take action where the northern, or national, policies appeared to threaten southern interests. The continued rumors of a return of Phoumi from his exile in Thailand are a sign of the restiveness of the na Champassaks because any comeback effort would need their support.

Also, as southern regional loyalties and identity remain strong, the na Charnpassaks believe they could, if necessary, pull out of the Kingdom of Laos and re-establish their own kingdom. Boun Oum, expressing his distrust of Luang Prabang and Vientiane, has reminded Western observers that there are "two Kings in Laos." Through informal meetings with the Thais and the South Vietnamese, as well as approaches to Lon Nol in Cambodia, Boun Oum has been developing a de facto independent foreign policy for south Laos. He still talks about secession, especially when it appears that the Communists are about to carve up Laos anyway, but the seriousness of such heretofore idle talk is open to question. Although the government in Vientiane could do little to keep the south in the fold, Boun Oum recognizes that the south would need the support or at least the acquiescence of the major foreign powers, particularly the US.

The Sananikones of Vientiane

Unlike the leading families of Luang Prabang and of the south, the Sananikones of Vientiane and central Laos can make no claim to royal ancestry. Vientiane was the capital of a traditional kingdom, but its ruling family died out after a disastrous defeat by the Thais in the 1820s. The Sananikone family's rise to power has been based on business acumen.

The family is headed by Phoui Sananikone, former prime minister and currently president of

the National Assembly. Within the government Phoui's younger brother, Ngon Sananikone, serves as minister of public works. Because of these government positions and the family's overwhelming importance in the territory surrounding Vientiane, the Sananikones have found their way into many middle-level positions in the civil service from which they are likely to play important roles in the future.

The Sananikones also hold major positions in the military establishment. Oudone Sananikone is chief of staff to General Ouan Rathikoun for the whole of the Royal Lao Army. General Kouprasith Abhay, whose mother and wife are both Sananikones, is the commander of Military Region V, which controls the capital of Vientiane. Kouprasith, who was raised in the Sananikone family from childhood, nevertheless has maintained relations with the Abhay home territory on the commercially important Khong Island in the south and has developed an alliance, to increase the power and influence of both, with a locally influential family there.

Kouprasith and the Sananikones need each other, but conflicting interests, particularly Kouprasith's ambition and sense of self-importance, have led to tensions. Kouprasith, who would like to succeed to the leadership of the Sananikone interests, has been frustrated and embittered by Phoui's preference to pass on the control to a Sananikone male rather than to a mere in-law. The present alliance could therefore break up.

The Military

The military has exercised influence in Laos only through cooperation with the great families and traditional leaders of the country. As in other emerging countries, however, the military may well become powerful in its own right. Its control of arms, transport, and men, its relative discipline (as compared with that of the civilian elite), and its access to large quantities of foreign aid give it a potentially overwhelming advantage over the civilian leadership, with which it currently cooperates.

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The power of the military leaders in national politics was well illustrated in the National Assembly elections of 1967. Along with other traditional forces on the Lao scene, the commanding generals in the military regions and Commander in Chief Ouan, who was active in the Luang Praibang area, each sponsored slates of candidates. Forty-six of the fifty-nine elected delegates came from the military slates.

Despite the military leadership's increasing political strength, however, the Lao armed forces are not truly unified or national. There is not, as there is in Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, one commander of such national stature that he can replace or give clear-cut orders to each of the regional military commanders.

In times of military crisis, such as the Pathet Lao threat to Thakhek in 1965 or the attack in the Boloven Plateau last summer, it has been possible to move troops from one region to another. These, however, have been the exceptions to the general rule that the Lao Army, although national in name, is essentially a regional force. It has required extensive US pressure to prevail on the officers, and the soldiers alike, to serve outside their home territories. At the same time, except in such crisis situations, local military commanders do not welcome the intrusion of out-of-area forces. They are jealous of their prerogatives and fearful of competition from both the national level and their colleagues in neighboring regions.

As a result the military leadership remains, like its civilian counterpart, fundamentally autonomous and regional. It can block efforts of the central government, but it is either unwilling or incapable of taking over the direction of the national administration.

General Vang Pao exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of the Lao military as a semi-autonomous regional force. He is on all counts one of the most vigorous and effective of the country's military leaders, but his successes are

derived from special relationships, which are not easily transferrable. He has a special status with his ethnic colleagues as a Meo tribal chieftain, but he also is associated with the most respected Lao princely family of the area—that of Tiao Say Kham, descendant of the royal family of Xieng Khouang. In addition, he receives special military and economic assistance from the US.

Skillfully playing on these assets, Vang Pao has steadily increased his traditional ceremonial and moral influence in the area—as well as his modern military and economic power—to the point where he is the dominant leader. He is even sought out by such influential leaders as the King in the north and General Prasouk in the south as allies, and has developed a special relationship with each. Both General Phoumi and General Ma, in their attempted coups d'état, sought to gain Vang Pao's support.

Influential and powerful though General Vang Pao has become in his own area, there is a limiting regional and personal quality to his power. His basic claim to distinction is as leader of the upcountry minority, the Meo.

He is thus an outsider to most Lao, and this limits his influence in non-Meo areas. In addition to being an able military commander—something in short supply—Vang Pao's strength lies in his relationship with the US, and in the particularly important role that his home area of MR II has played in the war. If his forces were decisively beaten, or if the US ceased to give him the kind of material and symbolic support he now gets, Vang



General Vang Pao...for once, the medals are earned...a tribal chieftain of the Meo minority and the most aggressive military leader in Laos.

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Pao would be little more than an important Meo figure in Lao politics.

The limitations on the power of the Lao military leaders is further illustrated in the various coup attempts that have occurred since 1960. They have all been regional or local in appeal, and have lacked national sympathy. Kong Le was able to take over Vientiane temporarily, even as Phoumi Nosavan was able to oust Kong Le from Vientiane and install Prince Boun Oum as prime minister—temporarily. General Kouprasith staged an attempted military take-over in 1964—and he very nearly succeeded. (The Lao Patriotic Front now cites this Kouprasith effort as the *de facto* end of the Government of National Unity, in which its members held cabinet posts.) Phoumi in 1965 attempted to topple the government and recoup his political fortunes and those of south Laos. These attempts all failed, however, because of a combination of disunity within the military leadership and the united opposition of the overriding, non-Lao component of the Lao political equation: the foreign great powers.

*Other Factional and Fragmenting Factors
in Lao Politics*

As stated previously, the major forces in Lao politics—military and civilian, Lao and ethnic minority, national and regional—run the society through a series of alliances and personal relationships. All these are fragile, and all are strained by frictions and irritations within the cooperating cliques. The King distrusts his prime minister's politics. There is a smouldering struggle for dominance within the Sananikone-Kouprasith combine. The na Champassaks are disappointed in Phasouk's military prowess, and Phasouk is disturbed by the commercial activities and corruption—including trading with the Communists—on the part of some of his na Champassak relatives. Similar stresses and irritations within the elite alliances can be found throughout Laos—limiting the effectiveness of each group.

The Lao Generation Gap

Within each element of the alliances, too, there are similar frictions and strains. Most of these seem to show up as attributes of age differentials in three relatively clear-cut, although arbitrary, groupings: the senior leaders, men 55 and older, who received their training prior to World War II and served as the early leaders of the nationalist movement; the middle group, from 40 through 55, that gained its education and experience in the war years and the period just prior to the withdrawal of the French; and the under-40 group, which is generally better educated—abroad in France and other European countries—but has had only limited practical political experience when compared with its seniors. In general, each of the younger groups is impatient and rather scornful of its seniors.

In the military, where there is less open expression of dissidence, this impatience was most clearly displayed in 1967 when some 60 junior officers signed a petition calling for the shake-up of the military command. There have also been continuing rumors of discontent on the part of the junior generals and colonels with their seniors, but this to date has not surfaced.

Among civilians, discontent is more open and some changes have already brought younger men more rapidly to the fore. In the 1967 elections, for example, one half of the previous members of the National Assembly were unseated and the new Assembly emerged with one third of its members under 40. Earlier, at the beginning of the 1960s, it was the members of today's middle group, civil and military, that in the form of the Committee for the Defense of the National Interest (CDNI) challenged and ousted the government of Souvanna. Today, two major youth groups, the Groups de Jeunes (GDJ)—or Young Lao—and the Mitasone—the young educated Lao or Returned Student Group, or Party—have become political forces to be reckoned with.

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There is, of course, considerable competence and skill within all these groups, and the great problem in non-Communist Laos has been to bring them together in some form of effective political organization or party. Lao leaders, and particularly Prime Minister Souvanna, recognize this need and have spent considerable effort to create at least one or two viable political parties—preferably one neutralist and one rightist—that would be able to compete with the Communist-dominated leftists in the future. Thus far, unfortunately, none of these efforts has been effective. Parties have been organized, flourished briefly, and then subsided into paper structures. Despite all efforts to the contrary, in non Communist Laos these have remained, like all other political groupings, fragile alliances bound together by personal rather than ideological commitments.

Ideology and Regionalism in Lao Politics

All these competing and cooperating forces of Lao politics operate in the shadow of the military struggle with the Lao Patriotic Front and its North Vietnamese Communist sponsors. Here there is one area on which all groups can agree: foreign assistance is required to combat the Communist forces.

The center group, or neutralists, of the Government of National Unity are convinced that the only hope for Laotian survival is through non-involvement in international disputes, through reconciliation and accommodation with the Lao Patriotic Front, and through the acceptance of an international guarantee against inroads from aggressive neighbors. This group dominates the national government and is led, of course, by Souvanna Phouma. It is perfectly clear that in a strictly Laotian political confrontation the prime minister and his program of accommodation would be overwhelmed by the combined opposition of the rightist and regionalist political leaders in the country. Souvanna and the neutralists stay

in power largely because they have the support of the foreign powers.

The rightists differ little from the neutralists so far as political and economic ideology are concerned. Both are essentially traditionalist in outlook. The right simply does not believe that accommodation with the Lao left is possible or that, over the long run, neutrality will work. It is convinced that the only hope for Lao survival is through military alliance with like-minded foreign powers. Because the rightists have been unable to develop sufficient foreign support, however, they continue, reluctantly, to accept the leadership of the neutralists. But they watch with suspicion and concern the prime minister's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement in Laos.

It is in this atmosphere that Souvanna has attempted a national settlement. Concessions must, of necessity, be made on both sides in a series of negotiations—but, so far as the rightists are concerned, not at the expense of their regional interests. The royal family is clearly unwilling to concede interests in northern Laos, even though the King and the prime minister might be more willing to make accommodations in the southern panhandle. Conversely, the na Champsaks, the Sananikones, the Nosavans, and the Issisiengmays hold little brief for the territorial interests of north Laos, but are deeply concerned for their holdings in the south. Likewise for General Vang Pao, the prime concern is with the well-being of the Meo minority, which is of less consequence to the other rightists, who are ethnic Lao.

For most rightists, regional interests are narrowly discerned, and as a result, competition has been the rule. The Sananikones and the na Champsaks have agreed in principle on the direction in which the government should move, but have rarely been close enough in practice to cooperate. It has only been in time of crisis, such as followed the Kong Le coup, that cooperation has been

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achieved and then this cooperation has lasted only briefly.

General Phoumi Nosavan, a one-time deputy prime minister now in exile in Thailand, is the embodiment of rightist successes and failures in

the 1960s. He stands in the wings, ready to be called back into action at any time the southern rightists decide they can no longer accept Souvanna's efforts at national reconciliation with the left.

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